

intended to move in because the apartment was too messy. When the landlord refused to refund the deposit, Mihdhar became belligerent. The landlord remembers him "ranting and raving" as if he were "psychotic."²⁷

Hazmi and Mihdhar finally found a room to rent in the home of an individual they had met at a mosque in San Diego. According to the homeowner, the future hijackers moved in on May 10, 2000. Mihdhar moved out after only about a month. On June 9, he left San Diego to return to Yemen. Hazmi, on the other hand, stayed at this house for the rest of his time in California, until mid-December; he would then leave for Arizona with a newly arrived 9/11 hijacker-pilot, Hani Hanjour.²⁸

While in San Diego, Hazmi and Mihdhar played the part of recently arrived foreign students. They continued to reach out to members of the Muslim community for help. At least initially, they found well-meaning new acquaintances at the Islamic Center of San Diego, which was only a stone's throw from the apartment where they first lived. For example, when they purchased a used car (with cash), they bought it from a man who lived across the street from the Islamic Center and who let them use his address in registering the vehicle, an accommodation "to help a fellow Muslim brother." Similarly, in April, when their cash supply may have been dwindling, Hazmi persuaded the administrator of the Islamic Center to let him use the administrator's bank account to receive a \$5,000 wire transfer from someone in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates (this was KSM's nephew, Ali Abdul Aziz Ali).²⁹

Hazmi and Mihdhar visited other mosques as well, mixing comfortably as devout worshippers. During the operatives' critical first weeks in San Diego, Mohdar Abdullah helped them. Translating between English and Arabic, he assisted them in obtaining California driver's licenses and with applying to language and flight schools. Abdullah also introduced them to his circle of friends; he shared an apartment with some of those friends near the Rabat mosque in La Mesa, a few miles from the hijackers' residence.³⁰

Abdullah has emerged as a key associate of Hazmi and Mihdhar in San Diego. Detained after 9/11 (first as a material witness, then on immigration charges), he was deported to Yemen on May 21, 2004, after the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of California declined to prosecute him on charges arising out of his alleged jailhouse admissions concerning the 9/11 operatives. The Department of Justice declined to delay his removal pending further investigation of this new information.³¹

Other friends of Abdullah also translated for Hazmi and Mihdhar and helped them adjust to life in San Diego. Some held extremist beliefs or were well acquainted with known extremists. For example, immediately after 9/11, Osama Awadallah, a Yemeni whose telephone number was found in Hazmi's Toyota at Washington Dulles International Airport, was found to possess photos, videos, and articles relating to Bin Ladin. Awadallah also had lived in a house where copies of Bin Ladin's fatwas and other similar materials were distributed

THE ATTACK LOOMS

221

to the residents. Omar Bakarbashat, a Saudi, also met Hazmi and Mihdhar at the Rabat mosque. He admitted helping Hazmi to learn English and taking over the operatives' first apartment in San Diego after they moved out. Bakarbashat apparently had downloaded stridently anti-American Web pages to his computer's hard drive.³²

Another potentially significant San Diego contact for Hazmi and Mihdhar was Anwar Aulaqi, an imam at the Rabat mosque. Born in New Mexico and thus a U.S. citizen, Aulaqi grew up in Yemen and studied in the United States on a Yemeni government scholarship. We do not know how or when Hazmi and Mihdhar first met Aulaqi. The operatives may even have met or at least talked to him the same day they first moved to San Diego. Hazmi and Mihdhar reportedly respected Aulaqi as a religious figure and developed a close relationship with him.³³

When interviewed after 9/11, Aulaqi said he did not recognize Hazmi's name but did identify his picture. Although Aulaqi admitted meeting with Hazmi several times, he claimed not to remember any specifics of what they discussed. He described Hazmi as a soft-spoken Saudi student who used to appear at the mosque with a companion but who did not have a large circle of friends.³⁴

Aulaqi left San Diego in mid-2000, and by early 2001 had relocated to Virginia. As we will discuss later, Hazmi eventually showed up at Aulaqi's mosque in Virginia, an appearance that may not have been coincidental. We have been unable to learn enough about Aulaqi's relationship with Hazmi and Mihdhar to reach a conclusion.³⁵

In sum, although the evidence is thin as to specific motivations, our overall impression is that soon after arriving in California, Hazmi and Mihdhar sought out and found a group of young and ideologically like-minded Muslims with roots in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, individuals mainly associated with Mohdar Abdullah and the Rabat mosque. The al Qaeda operatives lived openly in San Diego under their true names, listing Hazmi in the telephone directory. They managed to avoid attracting much attention.

Flight Training Fails; Mihdhar Bails Out

Hazmi and Mihdhar came to the United States to learn English, take flying lessons, and become pilots as quickly as possible. They turned out, however, to have no aptitude for English. Even with help and tutoring from Mohdar Abdullah and other bilingual friends, Hazmi and Mihdhar's efforts to learn proved futile. This lack of language skills in turn became an insurmountable barrier to learning how to fly.³⁶

A pilot they consulted at one school, the Sorbi Flying Club in San Diego, spoke Arabic. He explained to them that their flight instruction would begin with small planes. Hazmi and Mihdhar emphasized their interest in learning to fly jets, Boeing aircraft in particular, and asked where they might enroll to train

on jets right away. Convinced that the two were either joking or dreaming, the pilot responded that no such school existed. Other instructors who worked with Hazmi and Mihdhar remember them as poor students who focused on learning to control the aircraft in flight but took no interest in takeoffs or landings. By the end of May 2000, Hazmi and Mihdhar had given up on learning how to fly.³⁷

Mihdhar's mind seems to have been with his family back in Yemen, as evidenced by calls he made from the apartment telephone. When news of the birth of his first child arrived, he could stand life in California no longer. In late May and early June of 2000, he closed his bank account, transferred the car registration to Hazmi, and arranged his return to Yemen. According to KSM, Mihdhar was bored in San Diego and foresaw no problem in coming back to the United States since he had not overstayed his visa. Hazmi and Mohdar Abdullah accompanied him to Los Angeles on June 9. After visiting the King Fahd mosque one last time with his friends, Mihdhar left the country the following day.³⁸

KSM kept in fairly close touch with his operatives, using a variety of methods. When Bin Ladin called KSM back from Pakistan to Afghanistan in the spring of 2000, KSM asked Khallad (whom we introduced in chapter 5) to maintain email contact with Hazmi in the United States. Mihdhar's decision to strand Hazmi in San Diego enraged KSM, who had not authorized the departure and feared it would compromise the plan. KSM attempted to drop Mihdhar from the planes operation and would have done so, he says, had he not been overruled by Bin Ladin.³⁹

Following Mihdhar's departure, Hazmi grew lonely and worried that he would have trouble managing by himself. He prayed with his housemate each morning at 5:00 A.M. and attended services at the Islamic Center. He borrowed his housemate's computer for Internet access, following news coverage of fighting in Chechnya and Bosnia. With his housemate's help, Hazmi also used the Internet to search for a wife (after obtaining KSM's approval to marry). This search did not succeed. Although he developed a close relationship with his housemate, Hazmi preferred not to use the house telephone, continuing the practice he and Mihdhar had adopted of going outside to make phone calls.⁴⁰

After Mihdhar left, other students moved into the house. One of these, Yazeed al Salmi, stands out. In July 2000, Salmi purchased \$4,000 in traveler's checks at a bank in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. On September 5, Hazmi deposited \$1,900 of the traveler's checks into his bank account, after withdrawing the same amount in cash. It is possible that Hazmi was simply cashing the traveler's checks for a friend. We do not know; Salmi claims not to remember the transaction. After 9/11, Salmi reportedly confided to Mohdar Abdullah that he had previously known terrorist pilot Hani Hanjour. After living in the same house with Hazmi for about a month, Salmi moved to the La Mesa apartment shared by Abdullah and others.⁴¹

THE ATTACK LOOMS

223

By the fall of 2000, Hazmi no longer even pretended to study English or take flying lessons. Aware that his co-conspirators in Afghanistan and Pakistan would be sending him a new colleague shortly, he bided his time and worked for a few weeks at a gas station in La Mesa where some of his friends, including Abdullah, were employed. On one occasion, Hazmi told a fellow employee that he was planning to find a better job, and let slip a prediction that he would become famous.⁴²

On December 8, 2000, Hani Hanjour arrived in San Diego, having traveled from Dubai via Paris and Cincinnati. Hazmi likely picked up Hanjour at the airport. We do not know where Hanjour stayed; a few days later, both men left San Diego. Before departing, they visited the gas station in La Mesa, where Hazmi reportedly introduced Hanjour as a "long time friend from Saudi Arabia." Hazmi told his housemate that he and his friend "Hani" were headed for San Jose to take flying lessons and told his friends that he would stay in touch. Hazmi promised to return to San Diego soon, and he and Hanjour drove off.⁴³

Hazmi did not sever all contact with his friends in San Diego. According to Abdullah, after Hazmi left San Diego in December 2000, he telephoned Abdullah twice: in December 2000 or January 2001, Hazmi said he was in San Francisco and would be attending flight school there; about two weeks later, he said he was attending flight school in Arizona. Some evidence, which we will discuss later, indicates that Hazmi contacted Abdullah again, in August 2001. In addition, during the month following Hazmi's departure from San Diego, he emailed his housemate three times, including a January 2001 email that Hazmi signed "Smer," an apparent attempt to conceal his identity that struck the housemate as strange at the time. Hazmi also telephoned his housemate that he and his friend had decided to take flight lessons in Arizona, and that Mihdhar was now back in Yemen. That was their last contact. When the housemate emailed Hazmi in February and March of 2001 to find out how he was faring, Hazmi did not reply.⁴⁴

The housemate who rented the room to Hazmi and Mihdhar during 2000 is an apparently law-abiding citizen with long-standing, friendly contacts among local police and FBI personnel. He did not see anything unusual enough in the behavior of Hazmi or Mihdhar to prompt him to report to his law enforcement contacts. Nor did those contacts ask him for information about his tenants/housemates.

7.2 THE 9/11 PILOTS IN THE UNITED STATES

The Hamburg Pilots Arrive in the United States

In the early summer of 2000, the Hamburg group arrived in the United States to begin flight training. Marwan al Shehhi came on May 29, arriving in Newark on a flight from Brussels. He went to New York City and waited there for

Mohamed Atta to join him. On June 2, Atta traveled to the Czech Republic by bus from Germany and then flew from Prague to Newark the next day. According to Ramzi Binalshibh, Atta did not meet with anyone in Prague; he simply believed it would contribute to operational security to fly out of Prague rather than Hamburg, the departure point for much of his previous international travel.⁴⁵

Atta and Shehhi had not settled on where they would obtain their flight training. In contrast, Ziad Jarrah had already arranged to attend the Florida Flight Training Center (FFTC) in Venice, Florida. Jarrah arrived in Newark on June 27 and then flew to Venice. He immediately began the private pilot program at FFTC, intending to get a multi-engine license. Jarrah moved in with some of the flight instructors affiliated with his school and bought a car.⁴⁶

While Jarrah quickly settled into training in Florida, Atta and Shehhi kept searching for a flight school. After visiting the Airman Flight School in Norman, Oklahoma (where Zacarias Moussaoui would enroll several months later and where another al Qaeda operative, Ihab Ali, had taken lessons in the mid-1990s), Atta started flight instruction at Huffman Aviation in Venice, Florida, and both Atta and Shehhi subsequently enrolled in the Accelerated Pilot Program at that school. By the end of July, both of them took solo flights, and by mid-August they passed the private pilot airman test. They trained through the summer at Huffman, while Jarrah continued his training at FFTC.⁴⁷

The Hamburg operatives paid for their flight training primarily with funds wired from Dubai by KSM's nephew, Ali Abdul Aziz Ali. Between June 29 and September 17, 2000, Ali sent Shehhi and Atta a total of \$114,500 in five transfers ranging from \$5,000 to \$70,000. Ali relied on the unremarkable nature of his transactions, which were essentially invisible amid the billions of dollars flowing daily across the globe.⁴⁸ Ali was not required to provide identification in sending this money and the aliases he used were not questioned.⁴⁹

In mid-September, Atta and Shehhi applied to change their immigration status from tourist to student, stating their intention to study at Huffman until September 1, 2001. In late September, they decided to enroll at Jones Aviation in Sarasota, Florida, about 20 miles north of Venice. According to the instructor at Jones, the two were aggressive, rude, and sometimes even fought with him to take over the controls during their training flights. In early October, they took the Stage I exam for instruments rating at Jones Aviation and failed. Very upset, they said they were in a hurry because jobs awaited them at home. Atta and Shehhi then returned to Huffman.⁵⁰

In the meantime, Jarrah obtained a single-engine private pilot certificate in early August. Having reached that milestone, he departed on the first of five foreign trips he would take after first entering the United States. In October, he flew back to Germany to visit his girlfriend, Aysel Senguen. The two traveled to Paris before Jarrah returned to Florida on October 29. His relationship with her remained close throughout his time in the United States. In addition

THE ATTACK LOOMS

225

to his trips, Jarrah made hundreds of phone calls to her and communicated frequently by email.⁵¹

Jarrah was supposed to be joined at FFTC by Ramzi Binalshibh, who even sent the school a deposit. But Binalshibh could not obtain a U.S. visa. His first applications in May and June 2000 were denied because he lacked established ties in Germany ensuring his return from a trip to the United States. In September, he went home to Yemen to apply for a visa from there, but was denied on grounds that he also lacked sufficient ties to Yemen. In October, he tried one last time, in Berlin, applying for a student visa to attend "aviation language school," but the prior denials were noted and this application was denied as well, as incomplete.⁵²

Unable to participate directly in the operation, Binalshibh instead took on the role of coordinating between KSM and the operatives in the United States. Apart from sending a total of about \$10,000 in wire transfers to Atta and Shehhi during the summer of 2000, one of Binalshibh's first tasks in his new role as plot coordinator was to assist another possible pilot, Zacarias Moussaoui.⁵³

In the fall of 2000, KSM had sent Moussaoui to Malaysia for flight training, but Moussaoui did not find a school he liked. He worked instead on other terrorist schemes, such as buying four tons of ammonium nitrate for bombs to be planted on cargo planes flying to the United States. When KSM found out, he recalled Moussaoui back to Pakistan and directed him to go to the United States for flight training. In early October, Moussaoui went to London. When Binalshibh visited London in December, he stayed at the same 16-room dormitory where Moussaoui was still residing. From London, Moussaoui sent inquiries to the Airman Flight School in Norman, Oklahoma.⁵⁴

Confronting training or travel problems with Hazmi, Mihdhar, Binalshibh, and Moussaoui, al Qaeda was looking for another possible pilot candidate. A new recruit with just the right background conveniently presented himself in Afghanistan.

The Fourth Pilot: Hani Hanjour

Hani Hanjour, from Ta'if, Saudi Arabia, first came to the United States in 1991 to study at the Center for English as a Second Language at the University of Arizona. He seems to have been a rigorously observant Muslim. According to his older brother, Hani Hanjour went to Afghanistan for the first time in the late 1980s, as a teenager, to participate in the jihad and, because the Soviets had already withdrawn, worked for a relief agency there.⁵⁵

In 1996, Hanjour returned to the United States to pursue flight training, after being rejected by a Saudi flight school. He checked out flight schools in Florida, California, and Arizona; and he briefly started at a couple of them before returning to Saudi Arabia. In 1997, he returned to Florida and then, along with two friends, went back to Arizona and began his flight training there in earnest. After about three months, Hanjour was able to obtain his private

pilot's license. Several more months of training yielded him a commercial pilot certificate, issued by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) in April 1999. He then returned to Saudi Arabia.⁵⁶

Hanjour reportedly applied to the civil aviation school in Jeddah after returning home, but was rejected. He stayed home for a while and then told his family he was going to the United Arab Emirates to work for an airline. Where Hanjour actually traveled during this time period is unknown. It is possible he went to the training camps in Afghanistan.⁵⁷

The fact that Hanjour spent so much time in Arizona may be significant. A number of important al Qaeda figures attended the University of Arizona in Tucson or lived in Tucson in the 1980s and early 1990s.⁵⁸ Some of Hanjour's known Arizona associates from the time of his flight training in the late 1990s have also raised suspicion.⁵⁹ FBI investigators have speculated that al Qaeda may have directed other extremist Muslims in the Phoenix area to enroll in aviation training. It is clear that when Hanjour lived in Arizona in the 1990s, he associated with several individuals holding extremist beliefs who have been the subject of counterterrorism investigations. Some of them trained with Hanjour to be pilots. Others had apparent connections to al Qaeda, including training in Afghanistan.⁶⁰

By the spring of 2000, Hanjour was back in Afghanistan. According to KSM, Hanjour was sent to him in Karachi for inclusion in the plot after Hanjour was identified in al Qaeda's al Faruq camp as a trained pilot, on the basis of background information he had provided. Hanjour had been at a camp in Afghanistan for a few weeks when Bin Ladin or Atef apparently realized that he was a trained pilot; he was told to report to KSM, who then trained Hanjour for a few days in the use of code words.⁶¹

On June 20, Hanjour returned home to Saudi Arabia. He obtained a U.S. student visa on September 25 and told his family he was returning to his job in the UAE. Hanjour did go to the UAE, but to meet facilitator Ali Abdul Aziz Ali.⁶²

Ali opened a bank account in Dubai for Hanjour and providing the initial funds for his trip. On December 8, Hanjour traveled to San Diego. His supposed destination was an English as a second language program in Oakland, California, which he had scheduled before leaving Saudi Arabia but never attended. Instead, as mentioned earlier, he joined Nawaf al Hazmi in San Diego.⁶³

Hazmi and Hanjour left San Diego almost immediately and drove to Arizona. Settling in Mesa, Hanjour began refresher training at his old school, Arizona Aviation. He wanted to train on multi-engine planes, but had difficulties because his English was not good enough. The instructor advised him to discontinue but Hanjour said he could not go home without completing the training. In early 2001, he started training on a Boeing 737 simulator at Pan Am International Flight Academy in Mesa. An instructor there found his work well below standard and discouraged him from continuing. Again, Hanjour per-

THE ATTACK LOOMS

227

severed; he completed the initial training by the end of March 2001. At that point, Hanjour and Hazmi vacated their apartment and started driving east, anticipating the arrival of the “muscle hijackers”—the operatives who would storm the cockpits and control the passengers. By as early as April 4, Hanjour and Hazmi had arrived in Falls Church, Virginia.⁶⁴

The three pilots in Florida continued with their training. Atta and Shehhi finished up at Huffman and earned their instrument certificates from the FAA in November. In mid-December 2000, they passed their commercial pilot tests and received their licenses. They then began training to fly large jets on a flight simulator. At about the same time, Jarrah began simulator training, also in Florida but at a different center. By the end of 2000, less than six months after their arrival, the three pilots on the East Coast were simulating flights on large jets.⁶⁵

Travels in Early 2001

Jarrah, Atta, and Shehhi, having progressed in their training, all took foreign trips during the holiday period of 2000–2001. Jarrah flew through Germany to get home to Beirut. A few weeks later, he returned to Florida via Germany, with Aysel Senguen. She stayed with him in Florida for ten days, even accompanying him to a flight training session. We do not know whether Atta or al Qaeda leaders knew about Jarrah’s trips and Senguen’s visit. The other operatives had broken off regular contact with their families. At the end of January 2001, Jarrah again flew to Beirut, to visit his sick father. After staying there for several weeks, Jarrah visited Senguen in Germany for a few days before returning to the United States at the end of February.⁶⁶

While Jarrah took his personal trips, Atta traveled to Germany in early January 2001 for a progress meeting with Ramzi Binalshibh. Binalshibh says Atta told him to report to the al Qaeda leadership in Afghanistan that the three Hamburg pilots had completed their flight training and were awaiting orders. Atta also disclosed that a fourth pilot, Hanjour, had joined Hazmi. Upon returning to Florida, Atta wired Binalshibh travel money. Binalshibh proceeded to Afghanistan, made his report, and spent the next several months there and in Pakistan.⁶⁷

When Atta returned to Florida, Shehhi left for Morocco, traveling to Casablanca in mid-January. Shehhi’s family, concerned about not having heard from him, reported him missing to the UAE government. The UAE embassy in turn contacted the Hamburg police and a UAE representative tried to find him in Germany, visiting mosques and Shehhi’s last address in Hamburg. After learning that his family was looking for him, Shehhi telephoned them on January 20 and said he was still living and studying in Hamburg. The UAE government then told the Hamburg police they could call off the search.⁶⁸

Atta and Shehhi both encountered some difficulty reentering the United States, on January 10 and January 18, respectively. Because neither presented a

Atta's Alleged Trip to Prague

Mohamed Atta is known to have been in Prague on two occasions: in December 1994, when he stayed one night at a transit hotel, and in June 2000, when he was en route to the United States. On the latter occasion, he arrived by bus from Germany, on June 2, and departed for Newark the following day.⁶⁹

The allegation that Atta met with an Iraqi intelligence officer in Prague in April 2001 originates from the reporting of a single source of the Czech intelligence service. Shortly after 9/11, the source reported having seen Atta meet with Ahmad Khalil Ibrahim Samir al Ani, an Iraqi diplomat, at the Iraqi Embassy in Prague on April 9, 2001, at 11:00 A.M. This information was passed to CIA headquarters.

The U.S. legal attaché ("Legat") in Prague, the representative of the FBI, met with the Czech service's source. After the meeting, the assessment of the Legat and the Czech officers present was that they were 70 percent sure that the source was sincere and believed his own story of the meeting. Subsequently, the Czech intelligence service publicly stated that there was a 70 percent probability that the meeting between Atta and Ani had taken place. The Czech Interior Minister also made several statements to the press about his belief that the meeting had occurred, and the story was widely reported.

The FBI has gathered evidence indicating that Atta was in Virginia Beach on April 4 (as evidenced by a bank surveillance camera photo), and in Coral Springs, Florida on April 11, where he and Shehhi leased an apartment. On April 6, 9, 10, and 11, Atta's cellular telephone was used numerous times to call various lodging establishments in Florida from cell sites within Florida. We cannot confirm that he placed those calls. But there are no U.S. records indicating that Atta departed the country during this period. Czech officials have reviewed their flight and border records as well for any indication that Atta was in the Czech Republic in April 2001, including records of anyone crossing the border who even looked Arab. They have also reviewed pictures from the area near the Iraqi embassy and have not discovered photos of anyone who looked like Atta. No evidence has been found that Atta was in the Czech Republic in April 2001.

According to the Czech government, Ani, the Iraqi officer alleged to have met with Atta, was about 70 miles away from Prague on April 8–9 and did not return until the afternoon of the ninth, while the source was firm that the sighting occurred at 11:00 A.M. When questioned about the reported April 2001 meeting, Ani—now in custody—has denied ever

THE ATTACK LOOMS

229

meeting or having any contact with Atta. Ani says that shortly after 9/11, he became concerned that press stories about the alleged meeting might hurt his career. Hoping to clear his name, Ani asked his superiors to approach the Czech government about refuting the allegation. He also denies knowing of any other Iraqi official having contact with Atta.

These findings cannot absolutely rule out the possibility that Atta was in Prague on April 9, 2001. He could have used an alias to travel and a passport under that alias, but this would be an exception to his practice of using his true name while traveling (as he did in January and would in July when he took his next overseas trip). The FBI and CIA have uncovered no evidence that Atta held any fraudulent passports.

KSM and Binalshibh both deny that an Atta-Ani meeting occurred. There was no reason for such a meeting, especially considering the risk it would pose to the operation. By April 2001, all four pilots had completed most of their training, and the muscle hijackers were about to begin entering the United States.

The available evidence does not support the original Czech report of an Atta-Ani meeting.⁷⁰

student visa, both of them had to persuade INS inspectors that they should be admitted so that they could continue their flight training. Neither operative had any problem clearing Customs.⁷¹

After returning to Florida from their trips, Atta and Shehhi visited Georgia, staying briefly in Norcross and Decatur, and renting a single-engine plane to fly with an instructor in Lawrenceville. By February 19, Atta and Shehhi were in Virginia. They rented a mailbox in Virginia Beach, cashed a check, and then promptly returned to Georgia, staying in Stone Mountain. We have found no explanation for these travels. In mid-March, Jarrah was in Georgia as well, staying in Decatur. There is no evidence that the three pilots met, although Jarrah and Atta apparently spoke on the phone. At the end of the month, Jarrah left the United States again and visited Senguen in Germany for two weeks. In early April, Atta and Shehhi returned to Virginia Beach and closed the mailbox they had opened in February.⁷²

By the time Atta and Shehhi returned to Virginia Beach from their travels in Georgia, Hazmi and Hanjour had also arrived in Virginia, in Falls Church. They made their way to a large mosque there, the Dar al Hijra mosque, sometime in early April.⁷³

As we mentioned earlier, one of the imams at this mosque was the same Anwar Aulaqi with whom Hazmi had spent time at the Rabat mosque in San Diego. Aulaqi had moved to Virginia in January 2001. He remembers Hazmi

from San Diego but has denied having any contact with Hazmi or Hanjour in Virginia.⁷⁴

At the Dar al Hijra mosque, Hazmi and Hanjour met a Jordanian named Eyad al Rababah. Rababah says he had gone to the mosque to speak to the imam, Aulaqi, about finding work. At the conclusion of services, which normally had 400 to 500 attendees, Rababah says he happened to meet Hazmi and Hanjour. They were looking for an apartment; Rababah referred them to a friend who had one to rent. Hazmi and Hanjour moved into the apartment, which was in Alexandria.⁷⁵

Some FBI investigators doubt Rababah's story. Some agents suspect that Aulaqi may have tasked Rababah to help Hazmi and Hanjour. We share that suspicion, given the remarkable coincidence of Aulaqi's prior relationship with Hazmi. As noted above, the Commission was unable to locate and interview Aulaqi. Rababah has been deported to Jordan, having been convicted after 9/11 in a fraudulent driver's license scheme.⁷⁶

Rababah, who had lived in Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey, told investigators that he had recommended Paterson, New Jersey, as a place with an Arabic-speaking community where Hazmi and Hanjour might want to settle. They asked for his help in getting them an apartment in Paterson. Rababah tried without success. He says he then suggested that Hazmi and Hanjour travel with him to Connecticut where they could look for a place to live.⁷⁷

On May 8, Rababah went to Hazmi and Hanjour's apartment to pick them up for the trip to Connecticut. There he says he found them with new roommates—Ahmed al Ghamdi and Majed Moqed. These two men had been sent to America to serve as muscle hijackers and had arrived at Dulles Airport on May 2. Rababah drove Hanjour to Fairfield, Connecticut, followed by Hazmi, who had Moqed and Ghamdi in his car. After a short stay in Connecticut, where they apparently called area flight schools and real estate agents, Rababah drove the four to Paterson to have dinner and show them around. He says that they returned with him to Fairfield that night, and that he never saw them again.⁷⁸

Within a few weeks, Hanjour, Hazmi, and several other operatives moved to Paterson and rented a one-room apartment. When their landlord later paid a visit, he found six men living there—Nawaf al Hazmi, now joined by his younger brother Salem, Hanjour, Moqed, probably Ahmed al Ghamdi, and Abdul Aziz al Omari; Hazmi's old friend Khalid al Mihdhar would soon join them.⁷⁹

Atta and Shehhi had already returned to Florida. On April 11, they moved into an apartment in Coral Springs. Atta stayed in Florida, awaiting the arrival of the first muscle hijackers.⁸⁰

Shehhi, on the other hand, bought a ticket to Cairo and flew there from Miami on April 18. We do not know much more about Shehhi's reason for traveling to Egypt in April than we know about his January trip to Morocco.

THE ATTACK LOOMS

231

Shehhi did meet with Atta's father, who stated in a post-9/11 interview that Shehhi just wanted to pick up Atta's international driver's license and some money. This story is not credible. Atta already had the license with him and presented it during a traffic stop on April 26 while Shehhi was still abroad. Shehhi spent about two weeks in Egypt, obviously more time than would have been needed just to meet with Atta's father. Shehhi could have traveled elsewhere during this time, but no records indicating additional travel have been discovered.⁸¹

Shehhi returned to Miami on May 2. That day, Atta and Jarrah were together, about 30 miles to the north, visiting a Department of Motor Vehicles office in Lauderdale Lakes, Florida, to get Florida driver's licenses. Back in Virginia, Hazmi and Hanjour were about to leave for Connecticut and New Jersey. As the summer approached, the lead operatives were settled in Florida and New Jersey, waiting for the rest of their contingent to join them.⁸²

7.3 ASSEMBLING THE TEAMS

During the summer and early autumn of 2000, Bin Ladin and senior al Qaeda leaders in Afghanistan started selecting the muscle hijackers—the operatives who would storm the cockpits and control the passengers. Despite the phrase widely used to describe them, the so-called muscle hijackers were not at all physically imposing; most were between 5' 5" and 5' 7" in height.⁸³

Recruitment and Selection for 9/11

Twelve of the 13 muscle hijackers (excluding Nawaf al Hazmi and Mihdhar) came from Saudi Arabia: Satam al Suqami, Wail al Shehri, Waleed al Shehri, Abdul Aziz al Omari, Ahmed al Ghamdi, Hamza al Ghamdi, Mohand al Shehri, Majed Moqed, Salem al Hazmi, Saeed al Ghamdi, Ahmad al Haznawi, and Ahmed al Nami. The remaining recruit, Fayez Banihammad, came from the UAE. He appears to have played a unique role among the muscle hijackers because of his work with one of the plot's financial facilitators, Mustafa al Hawsawi.⁸⁴

Saudi authorities interviewed the relatives of these men and have briefed us on what they found. The muscle hijackers came from a variety of educational and societal backgrounds. All were between 20 and 28 years old; most were unemployed with no more than a high school education and were unmarried.⁸⁵

Four of them—Ahmed al Ghamdi, Saeed al Ghamdi, Hamza al Ghamdi, and Ahmad al Haznawi—came from a cluster of three towns in the al Bahah region, an isolated and underdeveloped area of Saudi Arabia, and shared the same tribal affiliation. None had a university degree. Their travel patterns and information from family members suggest that the four may have been in contact with each other as early as the fall of 1999.⁸⁶

Five more—Wail al Shehri, Waleed al Shehri, Abdul Aziz al Omari, Mohand al Shehri, and Ahmed al Nami—came from Asir Province, a poor region in southwestern Saudi Arabia that borders Yemen; this weakly policed area is sometimes called “the wild frontier.” Wail and Waleed al Shehri were brothers. All five in this group had begun university studies. Omari had graduated with honors from high school, had attained a degree from the Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, was married, and had a daughter.⁸⁷

The three remaining muscle hijackers from Saudi Arabia were Satam al Suqami, Majed Moqed, and Salem al Hazmi. Suqami came from Riyadh. Moqed hailed from a small town called Annakhil, west of Medina. Suqami had very little education, and Moqed had dropped out of university. Neither Suqami nor Moqed appears to have had ties to the other, or to any of the other operatives, before getting involved with extremists, probably by 1999.⁸⁸

Salem al Hazmi, a younger brother of Nawaf, was born in Mecca. Salem’s family recalled him as a quarrelsome teenager. His brother Nawaf probably recommended him for recruitment into al Qaeda. One al Qaeda member who knew them says that Nawaf pleaded with Bin Ladin to allow Salem to participate in the 9/11 operation.⁸⁹

Detainees have offered varying reasons for the use of so many Saudi operatives. Binalshibh argues that al Qaeda wanted to send a message to the government of Saudi Arabia about its relationship with the United States. Several other al Qaeda figures, however, have stated that ethnicity generally was not a factor in the selection of operatives unless it was important for security or operational reasons.⁹⁰

KSM, for instance, denies that Saudis were chosen for the 9/11 plot to drive a wedge between the United States and Saudi Arabia, and stresses practical reasons for considering ethnic background when selecting operatives. He says that so many were Saudi because Saudis comprised the largest portion of the pool of recruits in the al Qaeda training camps. KSM estimates that in any given camp, 70 percent of the mujahideen were Saudi, 20 percent were Yemeni, and 10 percent were from elsewhere. Although Saudi and Yemeni trainees were most often willing to volunteer for suicide operations, prior to 9/11 it was easier for Saudi operatives to get into the United States.⁹¹

Most of the Saudi muscle hijackers developed their ties to extremists two or three years before the attacks. Their families often did not consider these young men religious zealots. Some were perceived as devout, others as lacking in faith. For instance, although Ahmed al Ghamdi, Hamza al Ghamdi, and Saeed al Ghamdi attended prayer services regularly and Omari often served as an imam at his mosque in Saudi Arabia, Suqami and Salem al Hazmi appeared unconcerned with religion and, contrary to Islamic law, were known to drink alcohol.⁹²

Like many other al Qaeda operatives, the Saudis who eventually became the muscle hijackers were targeted for recruitment outside Afghanistan—probably in Saudi Arabia itself. Al Qaeda recruiters, certain clerics, and—in a

THE ATTACK LOOMS

233

few cases—family members probably all played a role in spotting potential candidates. Several of the muscle hijackers seem to have been recruited through contacts at local universities and mosques.⁹³

According to the head of one of the training camps in Afghanistan, some were chosen by unnamed Saudi sheikhs who had contacts with al Qaeda. Omari, for example, is believed to have been a student of a radical Saudi cleric named Sulayman al Alwan. His mosque, which is located in al Qassim Province, is known among more moderate clerics as a “terrorist factory.” The province is at the very heart of the strict Wahhabi movement in Saudi Arabia. Saeed al Ghamdi and Mohand al Shehri also spent time in al Qassim, both breaking with their families. According to his father, Mohand al Shehri’s frequent visits to this area resulted in his failing exams at his university in Riyadh. Saeed al Ghamdi transferred to a university in al Qassim, but he soon stopped talking to his family and dropped out of school without informing them.⁹⁴

The majority of these Saudi recruits began to break with their families in late 1999 and early 2000. According to relatives, some recruits began to make arrangements for extended absences. Others exhibited marked changes in behavior before disappearing. Salem al Hazmi’s father recounted that Salem—who had had problems with alcohol and petty theft—stopped drinking and started attending mosque regularly three months before he disappeared.⁹⁵

Several family members remembered that their relatives had expressed a desire to participate in jihad, particularly in Chechnya. None had mentioned going to Afghanistan. These statements might be true or cover stories. The four recruits from the al Ghamdi tribe, for example, all told their families that they were going to Chechnya. Only two—Ahmed al Ghamdi and Saeed al Ghamdi—had documentation suggesting travel to a Russian republic.⁹⁶

Some aspiring Saudi mujahideen, intending to go to Chechnya, encountered difficulties along the way and diverted to Afghanistan. In 1999, Ibn al Khattab—the primary commander of Arab nationals in Chechnya—reportedly had started turning away most foreign mujahideen because of their inexperience and inability to adjust to the local conditions. KSM states that several of the 9/11 muscle hijackers faced problems traveling to Chechnya and so went to Afghanistan, where they were drawn into al Qaeda.⁹⁷

Khallad has offered a more detailed story of how such diversions occurred. According to him, a number of Saudi mujahideen who tried to go to Chechnya in 1999 to fight the Russians were stopped at the Turkish-Georgian border. Upon arriving in Turkey, they received phone calls at guesthouses in places such as Istanbul and Ankara, informing them that the route to Chechnya via Georgia had been closed. These Saudis then decided to travel to Afghanistan, where they could train and wait to make another attempt to enter Chechnya during the summer of 2000. While training at al Qaeda camps, a dozen of them heard Bin Ladin’s speeches, volunteered to become suicide operatives, and eventually were selected as muscle hijackers for the planes operation. Khallad says he met a number of them at the Kandahar airport, where they were help-

ing to provide extra security. He encouraged Bin Ladin to use them. Khallad claims to have been closest with Saeed al Ghamdi, whom he convinced to become a martyr and whom he asked to recruit a friend, Ahmed al Ghamdi, to the same cause. Although Khallad claims not to recall everyone from this group who was later chosen for the 9/11 operation, he says they also included Suqami, Waleed and Wail al Shehri, Omari, Nami, Hamza al Ghamdi, Salem al Hazmi, and Moqed.⁹⁸

According to KSM, operatives volunteered for suicide operations and, for the most part, were not pressured to martyr themselves. Upon arriving in Afghanistan, a recruit would fill out an application with standard questions, such as, What brought you to Afghanistan? How did you travel here? How did you hear about us? What attracted you to the cause? What is your educational background? Where have you worked before? Applications were valuable for determining the potential of new arrivals, for filtering out potential spies from among them, and for identifying recruits with special skills. For instance, as pointed out earlier, Hani Hanjour noted his pilot training. Prospective operatives also were asked whether they were prepared to serve as suicide operatives; those who answered in the affirmative were interviewed by senior al Qaeda lieutenant Muhammad Atef.⁹⁹

KSM claims that the most important quality for any al Qaeda operative was willingness to martyr himself. Khallad agrees, and claims that this criterion had preeminence in selecting the planes operation participants. The second most important criterion was demonstrable patience, Khallad says, because the planning for such attacks could take years.¹⁰⁰

Khallad claims it did not matter whether the hijackers had fought in jihad previously, since he believes that U.S. authorities were not looking for such operatives before 9/11. But KSM asserts that young mujahideen with clean records were chosen to avoid raising alerts during travel. The al Qaeda training camp head mentioned above adds that operatives with no prior involvement in activities likely to be known to international security agencies were purposefully selected for the 9/11 attacks.¹⁰¹

Most of the muscle hijackers first underwent basic training similar to that given other al Qaeda recruits. This included training in firearms, heavy weapons, explosives, and topography. Recruits learned discipline and military life. They were subjected to artificial stresses to measure their psychological fitness and commitment to jihad. At least seven of the Saudi muscle hijackers took this basic training regime at the al Faruq camp near Kandahar. This particular camp appears to have been the preferred location for vetting and training the potential muscle hijackers because of its proximity to Bin Ladin and senior al Qaeda leadership. Two others—Suqami and Moqed—trained at Khaldan, another large basic training facility located near Kabul, where Mihdhar had trained in the mid-1990s.¹⁰²

By the time operatives for the planes operation were picked in mid-2000, some of them had been training in Afghanistan for months, others were just

THE ATTACK LOOMS

235

arriving for the first time, and still others may have been returning after prior visits to the camps. According to KSM, Bin Ladin would travel to the camps to deliver lectures and meet the trainees personally. If Bin Ladin believed a trainee held promise for a special operation, that trainee would be invited to the al Qaeda leader's compound at Tarnak Farms for further meetings.¹⁰³

KSM claims that Bin Ladin could assess new trainees very quickly, in about ten minutes, and that many of the 9/11 hijackers were selected in this manner. Bin Ladin, assisted by Atef, personally chose all the future muscle hijackers for the planes operation, primarily between the summer of 2000 and April 2001. Upon choosing a trainee, Bin Ladin would ask him to swear loyalty for a suicide operation. After the selection and oath-swearing, the operative would be sent to KSM for training and the filming of a martyrdom video, a function KSM supervised as head of al Qaeda's media committee.¹⁰⁴

KSM sent the muscle hijacker recruits on to Saudi Arabia to obtain U.S. visas. He gave them money (about \$2,000 each) and instructed them to return to Afghanistan for more training after obtaining the visas. At this early stage, the operatives were not told details about the operation. The majority of the Saudi muscle hijackers obtained U.S. visas in Jeddah or Riyadh between September and November of 2000.¹⁰⁵

KSM told potential hijackers to acquire new "clean" passports in their home countries before applying for a U.S. visa. This was to avoid raising suspicion about previous travel to countries where al Qaeda operated. Fourteen of the 19 hijackers, including nine Saudi muscle hijackers, obtained new passports. Some of these passports were then likely doctored by the al Qaeda passport division in Kandahar, which would add or erase entry and exit stamps to create "false trails" in the passports.¹⁰⁶

In addition to the operatives who eventually participated in the 9/11 attacks as muscle hijackers, Bin Ladin apparently selected at least nine other Saudis who, for various reasons, did not end up taking part in the operation: Mohamed Mani Ahmad al Kahtani, Khalid Saeed Ahmad al Zahrani, Ali Abd al Rahman al Faqasi al Ghamdi, Saeed al Baluchi, Qutaybah al Najdi, Zuhair al Thubaiti, Saeed Abdullah Saeed al Ghamdi, Saud al Rashid, and Mushabib al Hamlan. A tenth individual, a Tunisian with Canadian citizenship named Abderraouf Jdey, may have been a candidate to participate in 9/11, or he may have been a candidate for a later attack. These candidate hijackers either backed out, had trouble obtaining needed travel documents, or were removed from the operation by the al Qaeda leadership. Khallad believes KSM wanted between four and six operatives per plane. KSM states that al Qaeda had originally planned to use 25 or 26 hijackers but ended up with only the 19.¹⁰⁷

Final Training and Deployment to the United States

Having acquired U.S. visas in Saudi Arabia, the muscle hijackers returned to Afghanistan for special training in late 2000 to early 2001. The training reportedly was conducted at the al Matar complex by Abu Turab al Jordani, one of

only a handful of al Qaeda operatives who, according to KSM, was aware of the full details of the planned planes operation. Abu Turab taught the operatives how to conduct hijackings, disarm air marshals, and handle explosives. He also trained them in bodybuilding and provided them with a few basic English words and phrases.¹⁰⁸

According to KSM, Abu Turab even had the trainees butcher a sheep and a camel with a knife to prepare to use knives during the hijackings. The recruits learned to focus on storming the cockpit at the earliest opportunity when the doors first opened, and to worry about seizing control over the rest of the plane later. The operatives were taught about other kinds of attack as well, such as truck bombing, so that they would not be able to disclose the exact nature of their operation if they were caught. According to KSM, the muscle did not learn the full details—including the plan to hijack planes and fly them into buildings—before reaching the United States.¹⁰⁹

After training in Afghanistan, the operatives went to a safehouse maintained by KSM in Karachi and stayed there temporarily before being deployed to the United States via the UAE. The safehouse was run by al Qaeda operative Abd al Rahim Ghulum Rabbani, also known as Abu Rahmah, a close associate of KSM who assisted him for three years by finding apartments and lending logistical support to operatives KSM would send.

According to an al Qaeda facilitator, operatives were brought to the safehouse by a trusted Pakistani al Qaeda courier named Abdullah Sindhi, who also worked for KSM. The future hijackers usually arrived in groups of two or three, staying at the safe house for as long as two weeks. The facilitator has identified each operative whom he assisted at KSM's direction in the spring of 2001. Before the operatives left Pakistan, each of them received \$10,000 from KSM for future expenses.¹¹⁰

From Pakistan, the operatives transited through the UAE en route to the United States. In the Emirates they were assisted primarily by al Qaeda operatives Ali Abdul Aziz Ali and Mustafa al Hawsawi. Ali apparently assisted nine future hijackers between April and June 2001 as they came through Dubai. He helped them with plane tickets, traveler's checks, and hotel reservations; he also taught them about everyday aspects of life in the West, such as purchasing clothes and ordering food. Dubai, a modern city with easy access to a major airport, travel agencies, hotels, and Western commercial establishments, was an ideal transit point.¹¹¹

Ali reportedly assumed the operatives he was helping were involved in a big operation in the United States, he did not know the details.¹¹² When he asked KSM to send him an assistant, KSM dispatched Hawsawi, who had worked on al Qaeda's media committee in Kandahar. Hawsawi helped send the last four operatives (other than Mihdhar) to the United States from the UAE. Hawsawi would consult with Atta about the hijackers' travel schedules to the United States and later check with Atta to confirm that each had arrived. Hawsawi told